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## **Preventing Terrorist Attacks Using Russian Nuclear Weapons and Materials**

April 14, 2005  
House Committee on International Relations,  
**Subcommittee on International Terrorism and Nonproliferation**

### ***CONGRESSIONAL TESTIMONY***

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Ever since the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Americans have been lucky not to have more atrocities on the U.S. soil. However, the enemy, while weakened, is far from destroyed. Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri continue to issue threats against America from their hideouts. Their strength and support base, while diminished, is not eliminated. Other terrorist organizations inspired by radical Islamist ideology are still at large in Europe, the Middle East, the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, Southeast Asia, and presumably in the Americas. Some of them are willing to use weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to bring America down.

Recent reports about intelligence failures before 9/11 and the Iraq war indicate that there are numerous issues regarding U.S. strategic adversaries that the intelligence community did not handle adequately. I hope that under the leadership of Directors John Negroponte and Porter Goss (when he is confirmed) the intelligence community will address these issues with the innovation and creativity they deserve.

In the past, court proceedings and intelligence debriefings indicated that al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations planned their operations for up to six years before execution. Several operations, which aimed to use chemical weapons, were intercepted close to execution in Great Britain, France, and Jordan. The current hiatus in attacks against the U.S. homeland may be caused by preparation for massive attacks, including using weapons of mass destruction.

Osama bin Laden called using weapons of mass destruction against the U.S. a “religious duty.” He also declared that undermining America’s economic power is his strategic objective. Bin Laden did not confirm or deny pursuit of such weapons in press interviews, but a body of evidence exists that he actively sought them. For example, a defector from al-Qaeda by the name of Ahmad al Fadl testified in U.S. court that in 1994 he was tasked with procuring a radioactive material, apparently highly enriched uranium (HEU) from a South African source.<sup>1</sup> Ayman al-Zawahiri was spotted visiting Russia for six months in 1996—ostensibly to assist the Chechens to escalate their hostilities against Russia—and spoke publicly about the ease of procuring nuclear materials from the Soviet Union. In 2002, Abu Zubaydah told interrogators that al-Qaeda knew how to build “dirty bombs” and where to get material for them.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Kimberly McCloud and Matthew Osborne, “WMD Terrorism and Osama bin Laden,” CNS Reports, at [cns.miiis.edu/pubs/reports/binladen.htm](http://cns.miiis.edu/pubs/reports/binladen.htm) (April 11, 2005).

<sup>2</sup>Smita P. Nordwall, “Detainee Said to Link Al-Qaeda, ‘dirty bomb’”, USA Today, April 23, 2002, p. 8A.

In 2003, a prominent Saudi cleric close to al-Qaeda provided a comprehensive religious opinion (fatwa) justifying the use of nuclear weapons against the United States, even if it killed up to 10 million Americans, under the pretext that the U.S. is to blame for the death of 10 million Muslims.<sup>3</sup> Activities of Sheikh Nasir bin Hamid al-Fahd, the cleric who granted the decree concerning WMD, and his two colleagues, Ali al-Khudayr and Ahmad al-Khaladi, who provide that such “religious” justifications are important for bin Laden to justify mayhem. He portrays himself as a pious Muslim who protects and defends other Muslims and wages a “Holy War” (jihad) in their name.<sup>4</sup>

There are also media reports of al-Qaeda buying or stealing up to 20 nuclear warheads from the former Soviet Union; of Osama bin Laden providing three million dollars and a large commercial amount of opium to Chechens in exchange for nuclear weapons or materiel; and of four Turkmen nuclear scientists working to create an al-Qaeda weapon.<sup>5</sup> The veracity of these reports cannot be independently evaluated.<sup>6</sup> In February 2005, Director of Central Intelligence Porter Goss testified that al-Qaeda might have possession of Russian-origin radioactive material.

Al-Qaeda is an organization religiously and ideologically committed to the destruction of the United States and Israel, the subjugation of the West, and the overthrow of existing Muslim and Arab regimes throughout the Greater Middle East and beyond—from Nigeria to Saudi Arabia to Indonesia. Its proclaimed goal is establishment of a Caliphate (Khilafa)—a militarized dictatorship based on the Shari’a (Holy Law) dedicated to conquest of the non-Muslim world (*Dar al-Harb*, literally, Land of the Sword).

Other radical Islamist organizations share these far-reaching goals and anti-American agendas, including the Lebanese Shi’a Hizballah and Pakistani Lashkar-e-Tayyiba. The latter has links to al-Qaeda, technological sophistication and personnel, and international connections reaching into the U.S., which may propel them to attempt to acquire WMD capabilities.<sup>7</sup> For example, Hizballah operates a satellite TV channel and recently tested a military unmanned aerial vehicle to fly over Israel. Such low-flying vehicles can deliver warheads to targets otherwise protected against air attacks. Hamas, another radical Islamist terrorist organization, succeeded in developing rockets and producing Kassam short range missiles in the technologically primitive conditions of Gaza’s metal workshops and garages. Other Palestinian radical organizations utilized hot air balloons

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<sup>3</sup>Nasir bin Hamid Al-Fahd, “A Treatise on the Legal Status of Using Weapons of Mass Destruction Against Infidels”, May 2003, in Nuclear Resources, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, at [www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/resources/terrorism.htm](http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/resources/terrorism.htm) (April 13, 2005).

<sup>4</sup>Kelly Uphoff, “Osama bin Laden’s Mandate for Nuclear Terror,” JINSA Online, December 10, 2004, at [www.jinsa.org/articles/articles.html/function/view/categoryid/1701/documentid/2762/history/3,2360,655,1701,2762](http://www.jinsa.org/articles/articles.html/function/view/categoryid/1701/documentid/2762/history/3,2360,655,1701,2762) (April 13, 2005).

<sup>5</sup>Adam Dolnik, “America’s Worst Nightmare? Osama bin Laden and Weapons of Mass Destruction,” PIR Center, September 12, 2001, at [www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/resources/America's%20Worst%20Nightmare%20-%20Osama%20bin%20Laden%20and%20Weapons%20of%20Mass%20Destruction.pdf](http://www.ceip.org/files/projects/npp/resources/America's%20Worst%20Nightmare%20-%20Osama%20bin%20Laden%20and%20Weapons%20of%20Mass%20Destruction.pdf) (April 11, 2005).

<sup>6</sup>McCloud and Osborne, “WMD Terrorism and Osama bin Laden.”

<sup>7</sup>Audrey Kurth Cronin *et al.*, “Foreign Terrorist Organizations,” CRS Report for Congress, February 6, 2004, p. 55.

and hang gliders, which can be used for a crude bomb or a radiation dispersion device (RDD) delivery.<sup>8</sup>

All of these organizations attract a number of engineers and technicians who may facilitate their homegrown nuclear weapons programs. With considerable financial resources at their disposal, they can also recruit engineers and scientists from among thousands who received education in related fields in Russia, the West, and the Muslim world. Such clandestine programs would be assisted by the wealth of information about nuclear matters available on the Internet.

Furthermore, radical Islamists have ideological, organizational, and operational connections to the military and intelligence establishments of Iran and Pakistan. The former is a country suspected by the Bush Administration and the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of managing a clandestine nuclear weapons program, and the latter is a nuclear power with a strong influence of anti-American Islamists in its nuclear establishment and its military and intelligence services. Pakistan was the source of Ahmed Qadir Khan's global nuclear proliferation network, which supplied technology to North Korea, Libya, Iran, and possibly other countries.<sup>9</sup> There is a strong suspicion that prior to 9/11, two nuclear engineers from Pakistan traveled to Afghanistan to offer their expertise to Osama bin Laden.

Experts believe that terrorists are willing to inflict massive casualties using WMD, that they are capable doing so despite technical difficulties that may be encountered in execution of such an undertaking, and that they are capable of either stealing or building a nuclear bomb, even of a technologically crude variety. Cases of stealing HEU were documented by IAEA.<sup>10</sup>

Nuclear terrorism presents at least four distinct kinds of threats:

- Radiation dispersion devices (also known as "dirty bombs," powered by conventional explosives);
- Attacks on nuclear installations, such as reactors;
- Seizure and detonation of intact nuclear weapons; and
- Stealing or buying of nuclear materials to build a nuclear bomb.<sup>11</sup>

As sources of unsecured nuclear weapons and material, Russia and the former Soviet Union remain great proliferation concerns for a number of reasons. First, the Soviet Union was an empire with a strong external perimeter and weak internal safeguards. While the Soviet regime tightly controlled everything that moved across the border until the late 1980s, internal safety, security measures, and bureaucratic culture were

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<sup>8</sup>Cronin *et al.*, "Foreign Terrorist Organizations," p. 74.

<sup>9</sup>Anton La Guardia, Ahmed Rashid, and Alec Russell, "The Nuclear Supermarket: Race to Shut Networks Supplying Rogue States," *The Daily Telegraph* (London), February 6, 2004, p. 01.

<sup>10</sup>Matthew Bunn and Anthony Wier, "The Seven Myths of Nuclear Terrorism," *Current History*, March 2005, p. 153.

<sup>11</sup>William C. Potter, Charles D. Ferguson, and Leonard S. Spector, "The Four Faces of Nuclear Terror And the Need for a Prioritized Response," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004, at [www.foreignaffairs.org](http://www.foreignaffairs.org) (April 11, 2005).

inadequate. This was demonstrated by a series of technological catastrophes in the 1980s and 1990s, the most famous and dangerous of which was the meltdown of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor in Ukraine.

Nuclear, chemical, and biological material storage facilities often were—and still are—protected by nothing more than a padlock, an impoverished conscript, or a retirement-age guard. Moreover, corruption among general officers, mid-rank officers, and officials is rampant, while law enforcement is highly selective. Some general officers were removed from the ranks during the Yeltsin Administration (1992–1999) for corruption, gross negligence, and political involvement. Many others, however, who were no less guilty, remained in the ranks. Under the Putin presidency, the Kremlin has declared the military reform is completed and even fewer officers were relieved of duty despite major military disasters, such as the sinking of the nuclear submarine *Kursk* and the failure of missile tests during major military maneuvers. There is a pervasive sense in the military and security services that nobody is responsible for anything, and that justice, accountability, and responsibility are not a part of the bureaucratic culture.

Corruption is pervasive. Russian officers and officials have been accused of selling weapons to Chechen militants, of allowing armed Chechen to pass unmolested through road-blocs *en route* to terrorist attacks, of attempting to sell nuclear materials from decommissioned submarine reactors in the Northern Fleet, of selling vital components of military systems and vehicles, and of illegal sale of soldiers' food rations and food supplies, leading to malnutrition among the ranks. In such an environment, the sale of nuclear equipment and materiel, or even of individual weapons, is feasible.

Three contributing factors that may facilitate the purchase of nuclear weapons, material, and components in Russia are anti-Americanism, the growing influence of Wahhabi/Salafi ideas, individuals and organizations, and organized crime.

Anti-Americanism pervades the Russian elite from the top down and is escalating in the media. Every international event, from the bombing of Serb forces in Kosovo, to NATO enlargement, to granting asylum to Chechen militant leaders in the U.S. and UK is interpreted as directed against Russia and aimed at undermining its state power. Most recently, U.S. support of bloodless revolutions in Georgia and Ukraine were cast by the Russian leadership and media as aimed at pushing Russia from its “sphere of influence” in the Commonwealth of Independence States and attempting to install pro-American regimes in these former Soviet republics. Current and former senior Russian officials told this witness that “U.S. behavior [vis-à-vis Russia] is not that of a friend, but of an adversary.... While we need to talk to the U.S., we need to keep in mind that it is an enemy.”<sup>12</sup> This attitude is echoed in an incessant stream of media commentary and biased reporting, which translate into the results of numerous opinion polls in which the U.S. consistently comes out as Russia's “public enemy number one.”

The Russian military forces' posture, new weapons system development (including nuclear and missile modernization), the profile of military maneuvers, and foreign

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<sup>12</sup>Interview with the author, Moscow, March 2005 [source requested anonymity].

alliances (especially with China and Iran) all indicate that it views the United States as an unfriendly power. Such anti-Americanism may facilitate illicit transactions in which the Russian seller or thief would understand that the U.S. might be the target of the nuclear weapons or components acquired.

The increasing influence of Salafi/Wahhabi Islam in Russia, home to about 20 million Muslims, may facilitate penetration of the Russian military-industrial complex by collaborators and sympathizers of terrorist organizations, or use of Russian Muslims by such organizations as intermediaries in illicit transactions. Pro-Salafi organizations and preachers in Russia operate with few restrictions. Leading Russian experts on Islam informed this witness in March 2005 that Saudi Arabian funding sources expend large amounts of hard currency in Russia to “purchase” political influence among politicians, journalists, and other members of the Russian elite.

Finally, the influence of organized crime remains pervasive. Russian and post-Soviet organized criminal enterprises are more sophisticated and command more educated personnel than almost any other organized crime structures. Recently, the Prosecutor General of Russia stated that 500 large enterprises are controlled by organized crime, including major oil and gas supply and transportation ventures generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue. Organized crime has merged in many cases with “legal” business and has access to state enterprises, government officials, as well as to a broad range of international contacts. Russian organized crime may be the conduit through which terrorists acquire and ship nuclear components or weapons to their final destinations.

Thus, it is clear that the safety and security of nuclear weapons, technology, and materials in the former Soviet Union leave much to be desired. While strategic warheads and missiles on active duty may be reasonably secure, the same cannot be said about tactical nuclear weapons, decommissioned weapons, or highly enriched uranium and plutonium (which can be used in production of improvised nuclear weapons or components thereof). A rather primitive weapon, for example, a World War II HEU gun model, can be assembled by terrorists, and either transported to the United States or assembled *in situ* (on the spot). Radioactive material from the former Soviet Union—either from nuclear weapons or raw materials for production of weapons—can be used in radiation dispersal devices, popularly known as “dirty bombs”.

To diminish proliferation threats from Russia and post-Soviet space, the George H.W. Bush, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush Administrations undertook a number of steps to secure Soviet/Russian WMD. They funded Cooperative Threat Reduction Initiatives (known as Nunn-Lugar initiatives), and pursued non-proliferation projects with the Yeltsin and Putin administrations. This cooperation seems to be working to at least some degree. Granted, the U.S. may have serious misgivings regarding Russian transfer of light water reactor technology to Iran, since it may be a cover for more ambitious nuclear weapons manufacturing. Nevertheless, to this day there is little evidence in open sources that Russia proliferates nuclear weapons-related technology to countries of concern, such as North Korea and Iran. If anything, Pakistan seems to be the main culprit, followed by

North Korea and possibly China.<sup>13</sup> Even African countries such as Ghana and the Democratic Republic of Congo may be sources of nuclear isotopes for “dirty bombs.”<sup>14</sup> Still, Russia and post-Soviet countries top the list of potential proliferation sources due to their size and their sheer number of nuclear weapons—which some estimate in excess of 40,000—and hundreds of tons of weapons grade material. The Russian stockpile suffers from a number of issues which need to be addressed in order to ensure its security, including:

- Lack of reliable accounting and electronically updated (and up-to-date) databases that cover all weapons systems, including tactical nuclear arms, shells, and warheads;
- Mystery surrounding so-called suitcase bombs;<sup>15</sup>
- Poor security of some nuclear weapons systems, especially tactical and stored/decommissioned charges;
- Lack of modern means of monitoring, such as closed-circuit TV and motion sensors linked to a computerized monitoring system;
- Poor security of highly enriched uranium and plutonium stockpiles; and
- Insufficient security of research, medical, and industrial isotopes.

In terms of probability, an RDD attack is easier to execute than a full-scale nuclear fusion explosion. As far as construction of a fusion device, a HEU bomb is easier to manufacture than a plutonium bomb, and a crude improvised bomb is easier to build than a military-grade weapon. Having said that, there is more than a theoretical possibility for terrorists to buy a working warhead and deliver it to the U.S. in one of the millions of shipping containers that enter the country without examination by U.S. Customs. Terrorists may also smuggle such a weapon through a porous land or maritime border. In terms of executioners of such an attack, al-Qaeda, Hizballah, or Lashkar-e-Tayyiba may be the three organizations capable of technical expertise and possessing the motivation to undertake it.

After 9/11, the U.S. cannot view non-proliferation efforts as an “either/or” proposition. We cannot focus on proliferating states and neglect terrorist organizations, or vice-versa. Russia and the post-Soviet states deserve as much watching as other potential sources of proliferation such as Pakistan, Iran, and North Korea. Yet the terrorists already have demonstrated their ingenuity by using civilian airplanes and box cutters as weapons of mass destruction. Cooperation with Russian, Ukrainian, Central Asian, and other governments and special services is necessary, but this is difficult due to the reasons described in this testimony. These include anti-Americanism at the highest levels, corruption, and inefficiency. Still, realistic policy options need to be developed to prevent nuclear terrorism from taking place. It is unlikely that the U.S. will abandon its pursuit of

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<sup>13</sup>Guardia, Rashid, and Russell, “The Nuclear Supermarket” p. 01.

<sup>14</sup>Francois-Xavier Harispe, “U.S. Experts to Analyse Uranium Seized by DR Congo Authorities”, Agence France Press, March 24, 2004.

<sup>15</sup>Two senior Russian officials—the late General Alexander Lebed, President Yeltsin’s Secretary of Russia’s National Security Council and Yeltsin’s science advisor, Professor Alexei Yablokov—said publicly and testified that such devices were commissioned by the Soviet KGB (Committee of State Security), but their fate is unclear due to the limited time span of such weapons.

democracy and human rights around the world. In fact, a more open society is likely to bring more public scrutiny to lapses in security and corruption, including in the armed forces and bureaucracy. Thus, The Heritage Foundations presents the following policy recommendations:

- **Create** a comprehensive global network, which meshes and meshes intelligence gathering, counter-proliferation measures, and special operations to thwart proliferation.
- **Boost** cooperation with law enforcement and intelligence communities around the world to include joint counter-terrorist operations. Such operations would include deep on-site penetration of terrorist organizations, and would provide ample warning to neutralize such organizations at the early stages of planning a WMD terrorist attack.
- **Provide** ample funding and emphasis on non-proliferation and anti-terror joint programs with Russian and other post-Soviet government structures.
- **Neutralize** those involved in WMD terrorist operations and deter against high-worth and symbolic targets they may value.
- **Design** a supporting public affairs components, explaining the importance of joint anti-terrorism actions to the Russian elites, media, and broad public would be of great use.
- **Launch** a political warfare component via the intelligence community to encourage moderate Muslim clerics to issues fatwas forbidding terrorism using WMD.
- **Consider** a program instituting a monetary reward for interception of proliferation operations and nuclear terrorist activities, without creating a prize for unscrupulous foreign officials to simulate such activities.

To conclude, fighting against WMD-armed terrorist groups is possibly more challenging than any Cold War task. Then, there were only two players, which were coalitions led by strong nation-states with vertical chains-of-command. Now there are multiple players, many of them trans-national movements and other diffuse non-state entities driven by an ideology many Americans do not comprehend, which is based on religion and language they don't know. However, for the United States and its allies, there is no alternative but to combat and destroy these evildoers while preventing them from obtaining and using weapons of mass destruction.

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